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ABSTRACT

The preliminary findings of an on-going 3-year study examining the experiences of black students in a Canadian public school system are discussed. The project has been using students' narratives of their experiences in an inner-city public school system to explore the influences of race/ethnicity, class, gender, power, and social structures on dropping out of high school. Interviews were conducted with over 100 students, including 22 dropouts. The target was to interview 40 black students from each of 4 high schools. The complex personal stories of black youth presented in the paper show how the dynamics of social difference shape the processes and experiences of public schooling for black youth. It is argued that our understanding of the school dropout dilemma must be grounded in the institutionalized policies and practices of exclusion and marginalization that organize public schooling and structure the off-school environment of some students. (Contains 34 references.) (SLD)

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(RE)CONCEPTUALIZING 'DROPOUTS' FROM NARRATIVES OF BLACK HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ONTARIO

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the preliminary findings of an on-going three-year study examining black students' experiences in a Canadian public school system. The project has been using students' narratives of their experiences in a Canadian inner city public school system to explore the influence of race/ethnicity, class, gender, power and social structures on dropping out of high school. The complex personal stories of black youth presented in the paper show how the dynamics social difference shape the processes and experiences of public schooling for the black youth. It is argued that our understanding of the school dropout dilemma must be grounded in the institutionalized policies and practises of exclusion and marginalization that organize public schooling and structure the off-school environment of some students.

Key Words: High school, dropout, social difference, lived experiences, black youth.

INTRODUCTION:

> "No, sir, thank you for the opportunity for me to speak out and for listening to all this. It is nice to know a brother like you is interested in hearing from high school students. No one ever asked me these questions, ... not my school, ...not my family. All I get is blame. But I don't enjoy running into trouble..... They say I am 'at risk'. Maybe, and I guess everywhere, school, home or on the streets....No I don't feel good about it" (July, 15, 1992).

The above is a transcript of a taped interview with a black youth in the tenth grade considered by school authorities 'at risk' of dropping out. The remarks were in reply to my thanking him after an interview that lasted over an hour, and in which he talked about some of his school experiences. For me the above comments are significant for the underlying frustrations that this student speaks about, the fact that society and researchers about the public school system have not always solicited student voices and opinions about problems afflicting the youth. In this paper I provide some findings of the preliminary analysis of Black students' narratives of their experiences in the public school system.1 While these findings are by no means conclusive, they provide early insights into some of the student experiences that lead to dropping out from school.

It is generally acknowledged that one of the most crucial issues facing North American educational systems is the dropout problem (see Bloom, 1991; Cadieux, 1991; King, et al., 1988). In Canada, currently, it is widely believed that 30 percent of students do not finish school and that, at the present dropout level, as many as one million under-educated and untrained youth

will have entered the Canadian labour market by the year 2000 (University Affairs, 1991:5). Many Canadian black parents and educators have become increasingly concerned about the dropout problem and the effects on their communities (see Board of Education, Toronto, 1988). Community leaders do point to the disturbing trend of downward mobility among some black youth as the latter underachieve compared to their first generation, immigrant parents (Share 1991).

Many factors have been suggested as influencing dropout, ranging from streaming in the schools, poverty, Eurocentrism, white male privilege and discrimination (Ministry of Citizenship 1989; Pollard 1989). However, many of the analyses tend to overgeneralize without delving into the specifics concerning various social groups in the educational system. Earlier efforts to understand the issue of school dropouts also concentrated on statistical tallies of dropout rates without in-depth analysis of students' perspectives as to why they stay or quit school. In fact, studies of school dropouts have generally been structural accounts that offer little insight into the actors' points of view (see Weis, et al., 1989; Trueba, et al., 1989; Karp 1988). Few studies have attempted to explore the issue of dropping out from the point of view of students themselves (see Fine 1991).

Within the Canadian context, Cummins (1989), Radwanski (1987), Hargreaves and Earl (1990), Lawton, et al., (1988), Karp (1988), and Mackay and Myles (1989) have highlighted the specific problem of dropping out and underachievement among visible minority youth

and looked at strategies for intervention. These studies agree that there are genuine problems in our educational system that need to be addressed for minority students. But while the authors provide recommendations for reforms in the schools, they fail to explore adequately the questions of class, gender, race/ethnicity, power and history in the discussion of dropping out and, particularly, how students' lived experiences and social reality have contributed to compound the problems of minority education.

Much work needs to be done by way of re-theorizing and re-conceptualizing the whole phenomenon of 'school dropouts'. We must move away from simplistic cause-effect models of behaviour in which correlation implies causation. We need instead a grounded theory based on students' articulation of their lived experiences and a good conceptual analysis about how the diverse experiences of students inside and outside the school system contribute to dropping out (Dei 1992; Dei 1993; Lawton 1992).

While I focus on students' subjective lived experiences, I am also interested in the role social structure and culture play in shaping those experiences. By analyzing the subjugated knowledge and discourse of students, and highlighting the statements of the main actors, I believe we can be provided with alternative perspectives of the dropout phenomenon. In providing alternative explanations of how and why the school system produces 'dropouts' it may be necessary to focus on the power asymmetries of relationships structured by race, ethnicity, class, and gender that black and other minorities experience in the wider society.

It is important to ponder critically over certain questions. For example, what is it about mainstream public schools that creates many disengaged students who fade out? Are there some school policies and practises and occurrences in the homes that place minority students, in particular, 'at risk' of dropping out? Do the institutional forms and practises of public education systematically function to keep black and low income students from staying in school (Fine 1991: 156)? It is now generally known that in some Ontario schools a disproportionate number of black students (including immigrant and Canadian-born) are assigned to the lowest academic tracks.2

Methodology

Since May, 1992, with the assistance of four OISE graduate students, I have interviewed over 100 black students. This figure is made up of 22 school dropouts identified through my community ties and 25 students from various Toronto high schools who I managed to access over the summer holidays. In September 1992, I began another series of student interviews with black youth in four selected Toronto high schools. It is hoped that by the end of this school year (April, 1993) I would be close to completing the target of interviewing a maximum of forty black students from each of the four schools.

Within each school, students have been selected to make for equal representation of male and female students from general and advanced level programs in grades 10 and 12.3 I have also

interviewed a focus group of ten male and ten female students together from each of the two grades in two of the schools. The group sessions have also been a way of cross-checking individual student narratives.[4] Apart from these interviews with students, the project has also included an ethnography of the school (e.g., observations of school culture, work roles, gender roles, as well as student-peer and student-teacher interactions, and classroom activities). I have sat in on classroom discussions, staff meetings, and hung around school compounds and hallways in order to observe the varied interactions that take place in the daily life of a school. This paper restricts itself to the narratives of black youth who are still in the public school system.

In depth statistical analysis of this sample has not been conducted as yet. But it could be pointed out that at least half of the students interviewed so far were born outside of Canada and reside in one parent households. Other students live in with relatives or are on their own. A couple of the young women stated that they have children of their own to raise as well as attending school.

Theoretical Approaches to Understanding 'School Dropouts':

Lawton (1992) has synthesized the various theoretical positions, models and frameworks explaining 'dropping out'. He points out that Finn's (1989) 'frustration - self esteem' model views dropping out as a developmental process beginning in the earliest grades. The model argues that students who do not do well

become frustrated early in school. With time their frustrations can result in a lower self-image which eventually causes them to drop out. My critique of this model is that it does not adequately explain in the first place why some students do not do well in school. The notion of 'low self esteem' could be used to blame the student and thereby mask the structural and institutional inequities and contradictions these students have to deal with that engender the phenomenon of dropping out. 'Self esteem' may not be a useful concept for understanding school dropout because of the failure to acknowledge the individual self and cultural differences.

Take the case of Calvin, a 16 year-old tenth grader taking general level courses. He was born in Canada and lives with his mother and a half sibling in a Metro housing complex. He responds to charges of black youth having low self-image of themselves by arguing:

> "... At my school it is the white kids who are copying the way we blacks dress, walk and talk... (they) are listening and singing black rap music. They are behaving like black dudes. This is something I find positive for building myself. If I have any resentment it is the way some white students show their appreciation of our culture by copying it when they don't understand us...and not give black people due credit and respect" (May 16, 1992).

These sentiments are shared by a number of Black students we have interviewed. These students insist the problem is much more than knowing and understanding who they are. They see the challenge more in terms of convincing others about their capabilities. They argue entrenched societal beliefs have

negatively impacted upon their academic abilities. Deborah is classified as a 'high risk' student by some of her teachers. She has a child who is now living with Deborah's mother, which has made it possible for her to resume her schooling. She takes issue with the assertions that black students generally lack 'self-esteem':

> ".....That's not true..... self-esteem I have. I think (black students)....have self-esteem, but maybe not enough for somebody... I am an ordinary person, but like, this person said to me that whatever he does, he knows he's the best. And I go, 'Don't be so conceited,' [laughter] and he, and then he gave me his explanation. He goes .....somebody else may do it and they may also think they're the best, so why can't I do whatever I do, and I say I do it the best..." (January 25, 1993).

The 'Participation - Identification' model explaining dropping out (Finn, 1989) postulates that involvement in school activities usually results in identification and social attraction to a group. Conversely, the lack of participation results in a lack of identification. It is argued that the likelihood of a youth successfully completing high school is maximised if the student "....maintains multiple, expanding forms of participation in school relevant activities" (Lawton 1992: 20). Marginalised students can become isolated from the mainstream student body. They may feel alienated from the school system as a whole and consequently drop out (Finn, 1989). This model has some utility for understanding the impact of marginalization of racial and ethnic minorities in Euro-centred educational institutions. But it does not adequately address how and why visible minority students, for example, become marginalized. It does not account for why even those students who identify with the school system could still fade out because of the

way external structural conditions get mediated within the school system (see Apple 1989).

One of the issues students are speaking to centres around the extent to which the Euro-centred, patriarchal school system marginalizes visible minority students' presence, experiences and identities, especially in their case as African peoples who have rich history and have contributed immensely to the building of Canadian society. So that even the Black student who tells me he or she has friends at school, and that makes it difficult for him or her to 'drop out,' still talks about the 'hidden curriculum,' that is, the unwritten practises and procedures that influence student activities, behaviours, perceptions and outcomes. Some of the practises and policies of the school have purposely been promoted by the state to reinforce and perpetuate the hegemony of mainstream society.

The deviance theory of dropping out (see LeCompte and Dworkin, 1991) argues that by failing to support and respect the existing institutional norms, values, ethos and rules of the school, students stand the risk of being branded deviants. Consequently, these students may be denied privileges and rewards the institution accords to well-behaved students. With time, the 'deviants' internalise such institutional labels by redefining themselves in terms of their deviant behaviour. They drift towards behaviours that offer their own rewards rather than the institutional sanctions of the school. Students' oppositional behaviour acquires some legitimacy of their own. Because the school system would not

tolerate such behaviour as frequent absenteeism, poor academic performance and truancy, their perpetrators are eventually 'pushed out' of school.

The deviance model is particularly relevant for steering attention to institutional structures and processes that rationalize school decisions to 'push out' students who are non-conformists. However, it does not problematize how 'deviance' is constructed in society. This is important if we are to make the connection between the school and its policies and the wider social setting in accounting for school dropouts. This connection is essential for understanding the school experiences of Black immigrant students. The policies of the school towards 'non-conformists' and those who act and look different from the mainstream are a reflection of the social forces of society. Society expects the school to legitimize certain hegemonic and ideological practises while delegitimizing others.

Other theories explaining school dropout include those that hypothesize a link between structural strain on institutions and the behaviour and attitudes of their employees and clients. LeCompte and Dworkin's (1991) 'structural strain and alienation model' which argues that if societal changes reduce the fit between school and society, then teachers and students are likely to perceive their efforts and participation as purposeless. The outcome of such situation is burnout for teachers, and alienation and dropping out for students. The relevance of this model lies in the introduction of key concepts such as 'alienation',

'powerlessness', 'meaninglessness', 'normlessness', and 'isolation' to explain why students give up on school when their lived realities do not match the expectations society and schooling has promised (Lawton 1992: 21). Others studies such as Manski (1989), Stage (1989) and Bickel and Papagiannis (1988) have utilized economic models of cost-benefit analysis to try and explain the causes of dropping out. Stage (1989) and Bickel and Papagiannis (1988) focused on local economic conditions arguing that high school students will more likely stay in school and graduate if there is a good chance of gaining employment and improving their incomes with completed education. On the other hand, if students feel local conditions make employment unlikely regardless of education level then there is a good chance of students leaving school prematurely.

These theories provide additional insights into students' decisions to stay or leave school with references to the rational calculations students make when considering to stay in school vis a vis their social circumstances. There are students who leave school when they realize they could be better off economically doing something else. But even here, the narratives of the lived experiences of these students reveal the complex web of social structural, cultural and institutional factors that do come to play.

For Black youth in an inner, multi-ethnic city, a grounded theory for understanding the etiology of dropping out builds upon the insights provided by earlier theoretical approaches. By

analyzing the subjugated knowledges and discourses of students, and highlighting the statements of the main actors, we begin to uncover how social difference based on such dynamics as race, ethnicity, socio-economic class and gender restricts the educational and life opportunities of some students. We also learn how public schooling privileges and engages certain groups whilst disengaging and disempowering others.

Black Students' Understanding of 'Dropping Out' of School:

Interpreting the experiences of Black youth in the public school system is also to understand the societal and institutional context in which dropping out occurs. Specifically, the examination of student narratives reveals the intricate linkages between the social and historical forces of institutional power and how these forces intersect with the dynamics of social difference. The way students behave in school reflects their social reality.

To begin with it is important to know what the students themselves understand by 'dropping out'? It was observed in the course of this study that students come to the interview with ready observations, insights, analyses and solutions regarding their 'dropout' problems. The student expresses the sense that something is wrong in his or her schooling experience.

Bernice, a Grade 12/OAC student who says she is matured enough to be living by herself shares her views and understanding of 'dropping out':

> "I think of someone who simply just left the educational system, for whatever that individual's reasons may have

> been. They simply just left..(Int: You mean never came back?). Yeah... [pause] Oh, yeah... Right. Many people, I think, when they think of 'dropout', they think of someone who has left school and never went back, isn't bothered, you know, couldn't - has no interest, I think they think of someone like that..." (November 26, 1992).5

Amina, 18, admits she is not well liked at school because she "...fights a lot". To her 'dropping out':

> "... means a person that doesn't want to try any more. A person that gives up or a quitter..... Well because there's problems. As I said, the trouble is that they are .... abuse and all that stuff, etc... Not being able to cope with the school environment. Not wanting to listen to the teachers; not wanting to be given rules and assignments and stuff. And some of them have like learning disabilities and just can't cope with the school at all" (August 17, 1992).

Nisha is seventeen years old. She is classified as a 'gifted' student, and asked to borrow Patricia Collins' Black Feminist Thought from my book collection. In Grades 10 and 11 in the advanced level program, she insists she is not going to settle for less than going to University. Her parents are divorced and she lives with another sister and their mother. About 'dropping out' she says:

> ".....everyone has their own dreams and stuff. It's just like they're (dropouts) like disillusioned. They're just confused and they just ... they don't ... it's like they're afraid to look ahead now. They don't like the way today is so they just drop out of school" (June 27, 1992).

Steffan 19, was a participant in a summer job program with other Black students when he was interviewed last year. He views 'dropouts' as:

> "Very brave and courageous. They decided to make a move to benefit themselves. It may not be the right move for me but they see it as the right move for them and they do it!.... Right now it's rough (at school). I can admit that. But in

time we'll be able to appreciate everybody's needs" (August 13, 1992).

Marlo, another participant in the job program, indicated he was dropping out of school. He did not mince his words when he spoke about 'dropping out':

> " When I hear that (dropout), it just means the person couldn't cope with all the hassles that they're getting from school. The first thing that comes to mind is... yeah, that they couldn't cope with it -- couldn't handle it and said, forget it. And try something different... Yeah, that tells me, yeah, that's the end. They're not going back again, period... That's because they hate the school they're going to -- a lot of bull (I can say that?) shit. A lot of bull shit. To find somewhere where they can be comfortable. If they can't find it -- too much bull shit there -- they can find it somewhere else. Until they can find ... you know; somebody can get along with the people there. My school -- the first school I left was because of the reason of people -- the teachers and stuff that was going on was the reason I left. Too much bull shit" (June 8, 1992).

For students who admit they have considered dropping out of school at one time or other, such revelations are usually followed up with a recognition of the importance of staying in school. This is articulated in terms of a desire to learn, an awareness of the state of the workforce and the economy, parents' desire that their children fare better in life, a need for some structure in their day, and an awareness of the need to succeed as Black/African children. Black students' narratives suggest that when the student is considering leaving school it is often the existence of one caring adult in his or her life that makes the difference.

Students include in their reasons for considering leaving school, teacher disrespect, a sense of being overly-visible (i.e., targeted) for misconduct by school personnel, teacher

inaccessibility for help, absence of adult encouragement and expectation that they will succeed, a sense of invisibility (that no one would notice or care if they dropped out anyway), teenage pregnancy, and a need to help family financially which places schooling as a lesser priority.

Sometimes conditions at home compound student's problems. Elaine, a grade 12 student was born in Guyana. Today she lives on her own. Her parents have long been divorced and she explains the last time she saw her father was when she was "little". She has a senior brother who dropped out of high school. She points out that conditions particularly at home were ripe for her to be a 'dropout statistic'. She is still unsure how she managed to pull through the cracks. Growing up she lived with her mother "...for a while then got kicked out of the house," she says. She situates her understanding of 'dropping out from school' in the context of the home experiences:

> "Well, I look at it this way, like, I'm in, like -- a year and a half, then out. I probably would have been one of those statistics that says so many people dropped out, because I'm on my own, and no support from family or anything, just myself. And, when, when I got kicked out from my house, the first thing that dawned upon me was 'how am I going to get to school?' I cried and I was like, I called my house and I don't know how I'm going to get to school, instead of worrying about where I'm going to live. So, I came to school the next day, I don't know how I managed to get here, and, umm, I got help.... But, I could have been one of those somebody who's out there too, but I choose not to. You see, if I drop out I have no where to go. I mean, I look at it that way..... Like, it's.... the future's whatever I make of it, and, if I find if I dropped out, I would probably be somewhere I don't want to be, or I don't think I should be. That's the way I look at dropped out" (February 25, 1993).

The Economics of Schooling for the Black Youth:

Many Black students are at pains to admit that they or their parents come from low socio-economic backgrounds. They do acknowledge, though, the impact economic hardships have on schooling. Not being wealthy makes many things inaccessible to students. But economic background and hardships do impact on students' motivation and school achievement in both negative and positive ways. Dorothy, a Grade 10 student discusses her personal economic hardships:

> "At least, I don't consider myself rich, I'm, I'm surviving, let's just put it that way, like right now I'm scrambling for money, believe me. I walk to school because I can't afford to have TTC bus tickets. Yeah. I do. And sometimes, I....amazing, I don't know how come I didn't fall down as yet, or faint I should say, because I don't have a well-balanced diet. Because, yesterday was perfect, I had night school yesterday, and all I had was cereal and I went to school. And that was like, an eight hour day. Day school full-time, plus night school, and then went home and do homework and wake up and then come to school today. It's the same routine, and I didn't, I didn't fall as yet. I guess I'm strong, I don't know why" (December 6, 1992).

When asked whether it was easier for the student from a wealthy family or home she added:

> "I don't think so, because..... they expect you to do very well, because, I mean a well, the wealthy family expect his or her daughter to do well, or to continue wherever parents stopped off, or left off, I should say. So, it's not easy. I don't think it's easy on anybody, you just make do with whatever to the best of your abilities. It's hard, I mean, it's hard on everybody, but I think it's probably more harder, if there's such a word, on somebody who doesn't have the money to help them. But, then again, you look at wealthy people, and they probably just fool around, and then they go, what's another year or two going to do? But, for somebody who's poor, they're going to go, well I can't afford to waste another year.....I have to go and work for money, or go somewhere and get something fast. Like, it's like, in

some sense, you grow up faster than you want to grow up. But, a wealthy they can take as much adolescence years as they need."

For Nisha, 17, the desire to improve upon your home conditions can have a 'motivating' impact on the student:

> "Well.... even though sometimes I hate school and I don't want to go, I would say, "oh I'm going to drop out," but I'd never actually do it because of, I guess, the way my parents raised me. Like, I just think a person with an education is better, right, and I want to do something with my life. I want to get a good job and I want to make good money so I can get good things and go to nice places. I don't want to live on welfare in a rat infested place with cockroaches, you know. Like I have better things for myself, and I think most of my friends do too. I want more than my parents have. I mean they have a lot but I want more... Yes, I mean, if they push you too hard you might get fed up, but I think you're more likely to work a bit harder, for yourself, not for them. Or even, so you can prove to them, that yes, you can actually do it, because I found myself doing that. Because I don't live at home, right, but I want to prove to my whole family that I can actually ... who cares if I don't live at home, right? I can actually go to school, get a good job and do something, right, instead of dropping out, getting pregnant and doing stuff like that, right?" (June 15, 1992).

Julian, 17, a grades 10 and 11 student, struck me as a student who has done quite a bit of reading. But he also epitomizes the deep inner conflicts of Black students in the inner city coming to grips with economic hardships while still at school. I will always remember his powerful response to my question as to where he got his ideas from. He simply told me: "I live it."

> "Sometimes I think about leaving school, because really what's the point. You can go to college and get educated -- I know people like that -- and they don't have a job. So sometimes they just want to go and make money, you know, but... I don't think I'm serious about leaving school. Sometimes I say, yeah I'm going to quit school when I get pissed off at my teachers or something. But I don't think seriously about it... 'Cause all the time we're in school, we're not making any money. And just

> because you're in school it doesn't mean that you stop eating while you're going to school. So you know? If people were paid to go to school, a lot more people would be in school right now. Because they wouldn't have had to leave school to find a job so that they could take care of themselves and so on. A lot more people would still be in school, you know" (August 27, 1992).

Dealing With School Authority and Power Structures:

A number of Black students perceive the school system as more interested in maintaining authority and discipline than in providing education. In such contexts students are less co-operative with teachers who are disrespectful to them and appear disinterested in their welfare. They react negatively to the institutional power structure of the school and its rationality of dominance. Some students employ behavioural tactics that constitute part of a 'culture of resistance' which is anti-school (see also Solomon 1992). It is not coincidental that many of the students who fade out of school also exhibit what the school system sees as 'problem behaviours' (e.g., truancy, acts of delinquency, or even disruptive behaviour).

Speaking about discipline and authority in the school, Bernice, the Grade 12/OAC student, clearly articulates a position that the discussion of discipline cannot be conducted outside the context of a mutual respect between those who wield power and authority and those who do not.

> "I disliked very much the lack of respect for one another. I mean, for people who have to function within the same building, the same atmosphere, for three, four years, or more, I think it's so wrong to lack the respect that is lacking within our schools today. And I think teachers, principals, and people do -- that do have a certain amount of authority as

> far as the educational system is concerned need to realize that to get respect you have to give respect. And don't let your position, or your societal title, interfere with human respect, and that is what they are doing. That is what everybody is doing" (November 26, 1992).

Dealing with Teacher Expectations:

The students generally express the opinion that a small number of teachers exist in their school who make attending and learning worthwhile. The most favourite courses of these students are or tend to become the ones which are taught by these teachers. Clearly, if there is one area in which students show much emotion and anger when discussing unfavourable school experiences, it is the low expectations of some teachers about Black students' capabilities. Students explain such low teacher expectations as part of the deeply held beliefs about people who are non-white.

Keith's parents immigrated to Canada in the late 1960s. Keith, who was born in Canada, still lives at home with both parents. He talks about the constant struggle of Black youth to deal with the low expectations that some teachers have of Black students. As he puts it:

> "....as a Black student you are usually trying to prove to all teachers that just because of my skin colour doesn't mean that I can't succeed..." (January 11, 1993).

Jermaine, born in the Caribbean, will be finishing high school this school year and plans to go to university. He thinks he will be successful and the fact that he is in the advanced level program has helped. He has also accumulated the required credits. He credits any success to personal hard work, his parents and his

teachers. But he is critical of one prior experience with a guidance counsellor. To him that experience confirms what most Black students say, that the school system has very low expectations of them. Jermaine speaks about what might have been:

> "....The advice from the counsellor nearly broke my back. I could not believe it. She said I should be making choices guided by what my capabilities are and that she didn't think I can compete in the advanced stream. I will be left behind. I wanted to hear something like 'you can make it just like all the other students there. But you must be prepared to work hard because all those who succeeded worked hard. And I know you can'. When I told my mother she was furious and she said if that's where you want to be you damn sure you will be there" (October, 20, 1992).

The impact of teachers' low expectation of students must be emphasized. Dennis is an eighteen-year old Grade 12 student who was born in South Africa but grew up in Canada with foster parents. He discusses how the school's low expectation of Black students can affect the thinking of the students themselves to the extent of negative peer pressure (see Fordham and Ogbu, 1986). He argues that negative peer pressure tends to diminish Black students' propensity to succeed academically. For those who beat the odds to do well academically, there can be an emotional and psychological cost. The achieving student runs the risk of ridicule from his or her peers:

> "Sometimes I have to avoid telling my friends that I was in the library studying or doing an assignment. They think I want to be accepted by my teachers or I want to impress them. Something like I am 'acting white'. You get this treatment if you don't hang around a lot, but is always with the books, like a bookworm or something. Because those who run the school generally have such low expectation of what we Blacks can do academically some students reason why bother unless you want to impress them or be accepted by them. I am sure you know what I

> mean.... It is all wrong but there is a reason for why some students don't even try. For those who try you have to worry about not losing your friends and that can be stressful."

Maxine was born in England. Maxine had just finished high school when we also interviewed her. She is looking forward to college this year. She lives at home with her mother, who was herself born in Nigeria. The parents met in England where the mother was working as a nurse in one of the hospitals. She and her daughter emigrated to Canada when Maxine was seven years old. Maxine says she does not really know her father but then she learned long ago "to let him go." She speaks for many Black students when she talks about the teacher who is most admired by students:

> ".....I think throughout my course of high school and grade school, there were about two teachers that I did admire, just in the way they conducted themselves, in the way that they related to the students. And they didn't make it seem as though, 'Okay, I'm bringing myself down to your level, so that we can interact.'... But they just made it seem as though they understood and they could relate and I respected that, definitely. Because the teachers that can understand their students and that can relate make the best teachers, because once you have an impact on a child, or you affect a child in a certain way, you have taught them" (November 26, 1992).

Race and Gender Discrimination

Canadian born Leah 'begged' me not to ask of her age but only to note in my report that she has been in a number of high schools because "...I was looking for something I never found...". She talked about the existence of racism in the school system and its effect on the student:

> "As far as I'm concerned, I think everybody has a bias. Everybody. And racism is so, it's so strongly prevalent.

> It, it's, if you think about it, it is enough to literally turn your stomach. It is, racism is a very strong force that exists within the system, and it, it does too much damage....(Int: You mean in the school?) I mean we have to understand teachers are people, too. And there are a lot of teachers out there who simply just do not like Black people. There are teachers out there who do not like whites, or orientals. And you'll be surprised you'll have your hand up for days... and you will not be answered. And you could have attained a 98 and simply get a 54 because of your colour... or whatever that one's bias may be. You'd be surprised. Oh yeah, all the time. All the time. As far as I'm concerned, I have never been given the credit that I deserve. But I know one day I will get it" (November 26, 1992)

Elaine, the grade 12 student born in Guyana, also laces her discussion of low teacher expectations with instances of sexism at her school:

> "I think in our school.....especially, where the other... where the field is more dominant in men, and when a woman goes in and tries to succeed, it's pretty hard. Because I, I experienced it (male teacher bias against female students) when I was in grade 10 math, and there was -- I probably, if I recall correctly, I was probably the only Black girl in this math class, advanced. And, I used to always put up my hands to ask the teacher a question, because I don't think whatever he did was correct. And, I would have my hands up for like five minutes, and somebody else at the back of the room would have their hands for, like, [snaps fingers] just a minute or so, and it's a male, doesn't matter whether it's Black or white, but he would prefer going to that person" (February 25, 1993).

Deborah, the designated 'at risk' student, also talks about sexism being "...subtle in the school system..." and that "not all students may be aware of it." She talks of one particular incident involving a fellow Black student:

> "Jokes towards women... well, I never got any. Well, I did get one and I thought it was really rude. And I just looked at him, I guess funny, because people say I have this look, [laughter] and when I give them the look, they

mean, you shouldn't try it or something like that, and he said something to me. It was after school, and I was working on a presentation for physics, and he goes, 'Hey babe,' and he said something like 'I want to sex you,' and I was like...." (January, 29, 1993).

What these instances of prejudicial and discriminatory treatment on the basis of race and gender do is to further alienate students from the school system. They are also the sources of emotional and psychological conflicts and other health distress for students. Unfortunately these issues are hardly discussed in the discourse about race, gender and class discrimination in the schools. Elsewhere (Dei 1993) I have talked about Suzette, a very articulate seventeen year old grade 12 student who talks about some of the mental and psychological abuse in the school that can be very disempowering to a Black female student and can force her to quit school.

Black Students and Negotiating Self and Group Cultural Identities

Added to these pressures is Black students' constant struggle to maintain their individual self and group cultural identities. Sometimes their actions do come into conflict not only with school authorities but even among their peers. Some attribute the problem to a very narrow school curriculum that, until very recently, least emphasized their cultural and ancestral backgrounds, and the contributions of peoples of African descent to Canadian society and world civilization. The month of February is set aside for activities marking the achievements of Black and African peoples in history. Students appreciate the chance to show and tell about

their cultures and to express their identities as peoples of African descent. But there is also a wide acknowledgement that this is not enough and that for much of the time their existence is marginalised. Students define their marginalization in the context of both the formal curriculum and the unwritten code of acceptable behaviour and practises in the public school system.

Michael, a nineteen year old general level student came to Canada from Jamaica nearly nine years ago. The frustrations and the emotions with which he speaks about the deprivileging of Black peoples' history and contributions to society throughout his public schooling cannot be lost on the astute listener:

> "I only know about Canadian history which is white history. I did not learn anything about Black people. And then, probably in the past two years, I would say we have improved in our geography, but we don't really learn about the cultural background, we just learned about the.... not even the people, but just the city or the country. Basics, nothing deep. Is it tough? I mean, I would like to know more about my history, yes. A lot more. I think I need to know a lot more than I know" (November 15, 1992).

Maxine's views about the formal curriculum supports Michael's contention:

> "The curriculum, I didn't like it. I found it was one-sided, especially when it came down to History. There was never a mention of any Black people that have contributed to society, what they have done. Everything was just white like Einstein. I mean, everything, it's the white man that did. History is just based on the European Canadian that came over or conquered and they landed in the St. Lawrence. There was no mention of the Africans that helped build a railway, that ran away from the South and came up to Nova Scotia and helped work and build Canada too, and helped support the world war, no mention of that" (June 22, 1992).

Michael's girlfriend, Sharon, provides some additional insights into how students sometimes have to negotiate their

individual self and group cultural identities within the school. The two students became "...very close buddies" when Sharon joined the Black Heritage Club in her school. Joining the club did not come easy as she recalls:

> "...I remember when somebody, when this person called me an Oreo, I was like, 'what does that mean?' Like, I'm asking Black friends that I have 'what does Oreo mean?' and then they told me like, 'you're only Black on the outside, but you're white inside'. And I was like 'Oh, really.' So, I think, from just that one remark from my fellow Black sister, actually got me interested in the Black Heritage Club. I was always interested, but not... fully" (November 15, 1992).

Students are generally critical when discussing their reflections on the Canadian school system, particularly the fact that not all world experiences are represented in classroom discourses and in the texts. Black youth talk about the fact that classroom discourses occasionally speak to their lived experiences, the fact of being Black, a Black woman, poor or any form of a minority living in Canadian society. But, they do not see the school as the sole source of concern and site for political action and social response.

Family and Parental Guidance

Students' narratives reveal their understanding of the importance of the family and particularly parental guidance in their schooling. Students also discuss why relationships in their homes may not permit them, sometimes, to seek or receive help with school work from their parents. Some students simply do not want to bother already busy parents or feel their parents would not be able to help. Others would prefer not to share work with parents

in case it gives rise to parental pressure for their academic excellence. Generally, these students understand and appreciate the daily sacrifices their parents are making such as holding two or three jobs just to put food on the table. In fact, many students state that they persevere because they want to be like their parents.

Margaret, who wants to be a dentist after completing her university education, is currently in Grade 12 advanced. She pays tribute to her mother when she explains why she never has thought about quitting school prematurely:

> "I have to respect my mom, and I have to thank her for all the nagging she did.... I respect her for always telling me that the world have nothing to offer out there unless you put something inside. And, I guess that always remained at the back of my mind, that the world has nothing to offer unless I put something there to offer me. And, I guess that's why I did not become one of the statistics" (January 29, 1993).

Judy, 20, understands the importance of the family involvement in a child's schooling, particularly, in a single parent household. Like many students she understands some of the economic reasons behind her mother's inability to devote quality time for her school and the anguish that some parents feel for this situation. Her long narrative, interrupted occasionally with my nodding of approval, reveals a deeper understanding of the impact the social reality of parents on their children's education. She argues that the awareness of her mother's hardships and sacrifices makes her (Judy) reluctant to impose her own problems on already strained shoulders. She would prefer to keep any educational worries to herself:

"Well, my mom is not physically involved in school, but at home, when I was there, I should say, she actually took -- encouraged me to do my homework. Okay? But then, sometimes, like, I would actually not do my homework until I heard my mom say: 'don't you have homework?' and I go 'I already did it,' which I didn't .... (Int: right) .... I probably did this because it was like, I was at school most of the days and nights, I used to come home late at night, and she was at work most of the time, and she used to come home early (early morning), kind of, and there's no family or quality time spent with my mom and myself. So, I used to say, I don't have any homework, or maybe she may just be in the kitchen and I may just be in the kitchen too, and I may just be reading, ... (Int: right) .... and I'll stop reading and then I'll probably talk to her if she asked me a question. So, I think, when I said I didn't have homework, that's because I wanted to spend time with my mom, but I guess she didn't look at it that way. So, but physically, she wasn't involved. Mentally, at home, she was doing a really good job and would encourage me to do my school work .... I did wish she, because, I mean, I've been at here .... (mentions name of her school) .... here, for five years and my mom never came out to one parent night meeting or anything that I did, she never came out to see me at school or anything like that. She had to work .... But I wish she was involved more" (February 25, 1993).

While students understand the structural realities of their parents they also want parents to take a more proactive involvement and engagement in their children's schooling. They do not want parents to wait till problems arise before responding or getting involved. They want parents to be forceful and relentless in demanding meaningful changes in public schooling. Students feel that parents could help by listening more and by being sounding boards to their children as the young people worked through things on their minds.

Students also want parents to be aware of some of their actions that may serve to put undue pressure and demands on their children to academically perform in the face of many challenges.

Elaine in explaining the reasons for her being kicked out of the house hints at this concern:

> "She (mother) always wanted the best of me. I didn't do very well. I got a 55, and my mom didn't like it. And, so I kept back the report card for a month, because I knew she wouldn't have liked the marks, and because of that...because of keeping back the report card, plus the 55 that I got, it was not a nice end result when she found out. Well, I lived on my own for a year and a half, grade 11, part of grade -- yeah grade 11, partway through grade 12. I went back .....and, I guess, everything wasn't okay, there was tension in the house. So, I kind of struggled, like..... And then, I guess it just built up...., everything burst, and... I got kicked out again" (February 25, 1993)

DISCUSSION:

The power dynamics of culture, class, race, ethnicity, and gender influence the way students think and act. The complex personal stories of Black youth reveal how the dynamics of social difference shape the processes and experiences of public schooling. Among Black youth, dropping out is one of the manifestations of how social difference impacts on educational outcomes. The process of schooling undermines Black students' subjectivities and their lived experiences, whether as poor, middle class, male, female, single parent, immigrant or Canadian born. For many of these students the subjection to racial, class and/or gender subordination, whether in the schools or in the wider society, denies them respect, power and privilege by delegitimizing their individual and collective experiences and self-worth. This adds to their frustrations and alienation from many societal institutions. Thus, the tendency to

rebel through oppositional behaviours, like dropping out, increases.

The point worth emphasizing here is that we cannot divorce Black students' experiences in the schools and in society from behaviours such as truancy, questioning of authority, disrespect for institutionalized power structures, and other rebellious acts which tend to land students in trouble with school authorities. As the school and society enforce rules without a simultaneous attempt to address pressing and legitimate student concerns, students lose faith in the public school system and eventually fade out.

Black students' narratives of their school and home experiences suggest that dropping out of school can be a resolution to the deep inner conflicts. Some students feel betrayed by the school system that promised to develop their academic potentials, raise their self-concept and self-worth, and build their confidence. They witness how the system marginalizes their experiences in society and alienates them with rigid institutional structures. Dropping out therefore becomes one of the ways of breaking out of the shackle of institutional dominance and control, and to extricate oneself from a disadvantaged position.

The preliminary findings of this study challenge some commonly held ideas about the schooling of students of African descent. The study findings problematize psychological and pathologizing explanations of 'a lack of self esteem' as a major problem facing many Black students. The study also questions concepts like the 'at risk' student. Given the narratives of the school experiences

of these students, a pertinent question is who is and who is not an 'at risk' student? The answer to this question may not be that easy as conventionally thought. Every student is potentially 'at risk,' given students' incessant struggle to develop a sense of connectedness and belonging in the school.

Student narratives also point out that the 'dropout' is not a 'problem' child. In fact, he or she has a clear sense of direction and understanding of society. 'Dropping out' is a very traumatic experience for students. It is not something they 'enjoy'.6 It is the last resort when many things appear to have failed the student. Black students talk about the importance of education to them and to their families. Unfortunately, while many of these students have very high expectations of the school system, they come to realize later on that the system may not after all be capable of providing them with what they want to be trained for. It is often a traumatic experience for some students trying to reconcile the often contradictory and conflicting messages they receive in school and the harsh realities of their social existence.

We also need to challenge the myth that somehow 'dropouts' are irresponsible. When questioned as to what their roles and responsibilities are, as students in their schools, students expressed a sense of being responsible for improving themselves, helping others to improve and being allowed to contribute to the improvement of the school atmosphere and spirit. The fact is these students will take ultimate responsibility for their successes and failures, but would not accept responsibility for acts of racial,

class, gender and sexual bigotry and any other discriminatory practises directed at them.

Students' narratives, when matched with corresponding accounts of actual 'dropouts' (see Dei 1993), point out that the search for an understanding of the school dropout dilemma must be rooted in the institutionalized policies and practises of exclusion and marginalization that organize public schooling and also structure the home environment and the societal experiences of many students.

When Black youth speak of being bored, frustrated and alienated from the school system, they are making indirect references to social structural conditions. We must be critical of attempts to view dropping out from a "pathological perspective" and to 'individualize' the problem (see also Lomotey, 1990; Trueba, et al., 1989). Such approaches tend to absolve the schools, the homes and the wider society of any responsibility for the conditions that make dropping out a viable option for students.

As educators, there is a powerful message for us when students fail to do homework or pay attention in class, when students prefer to hang in the hallways instead of being in class, when students skip school and classes, when students show a general lack of respect for school rules and regulations, when students cannot connect nor identify with the school. We need to critically view these behavioural patterns and strategies as students' ways of questioning the very foundations of schooling in our society.

It is no sheer coincidence that when Black students are asked about things they would change about school they articulate a

desire to change teacher attitude and training in order that students would be treated as 'persons', the improvement of student-teacher and student-student relations so that people would treat each other more respectfully, the inclusion of other cultures' contribution to knowledge in the school curriculum for the benefit of *all* students, and allowing Black students to get a fair chance at fully opening their hearts and minds to the task of learning. These students do not enjoy using up all their emotional energy on fighting discouragement.

Let me conclude this essay by offering some suggestions on how as educators we can assist in building Black students' sense of identification and connectedness to the school system. It is extremely important for the schools to incorporate Africa-centred perspectives/approaches in the processes of learning, teaching, administration of education of Black youths. Black students must see themselves represented in all aspects of the school system. The schools must teach about the African cultural heritage and values of human co-existence with nature (not control over nature), group unity, mutuality, collective work and responsibility. Students must not be taught to perceive their interest as more important than the interest of the social group to which they belong.

The current system of schooling and education has to be radically transformed in order to reverse the inferiorization of Black youths by the historically Euro-centred school system. The schools should promote pedagogical practises that glorify but not

romanticize, denigrate or negate 'Blackness' and the African human condition. The schools must equip the Black student with the requisite cultural capital to be able to deal with some of the challenges of going to school in multi-ethnic communities. The education of Black youths must not lead to a dependence on others, but rather must foster a state of independence and self-reliance.

NOTES

1. By 'Black' I mean students of African ancestry and who identify themselves as such.
2. The Ontario Public School system places students entering Grade 9 into three different course levels based on ability: The basic or vocational level, the general four year level, and the advanced level which includes courses leading to University entrance. This is a process referred to as 'streaming'. In the last two years, a few schools have destreamed Grade 9 on an experimental basis. There is talk now to destream all schools in the new school reforms' package being pushed by the provincial government. It is seen as one of the measures to address the high school dropout rate.
3. The criteria for selecting Grade 10 students at 'high risk' of dropping out include below-average marks, poor attendance or inadequate accumulation of credits (see Ziegler 1989; Waterhouse 1990). Grade 12 students are providing information as to why they stayed in school and how the system has worked for them. I have generally focused on the total accumulated credits as an important criterion in the grade selection students.
4. Being a Black myself has facilitated this study, as the students identify with me and have been able to take me into their confidence.

5. OAC, meaning Ontario Academic Credit, is the former Grade 13 that has been abandoned in the Ontario public school system. OAC students take courses to enter college/university.

6. Upon completing an interview, students will inquire about how the research will be helpful to them and their concerns anytime they see you in the hallways. This demonstrates their sincere interest and concern about their own educational welfare. It is always difficult emotionally to explain to students that programs which may emerge out of this research may not be implemented very quickly. Their needs become quite apparent, making it hard to not be able to provide necessary assistance.

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